When four worlds collide

Talan Miller blends Team Role theory, Tuckman's model, Situational Leadership and neuroscience to show how leadership changes as a team develops

The Tuckman model of 1965 is widely known for expressing, in simple terms, how a team will develop. According to it, teams develop naturally through the four stages of *Forming, Storming, Norming* and *Performing*.

Some theorists add an additional two stages of *Adjourning* and *Reforming*, which take into account how people will deal with the dispersal of a team and the need to revisit the lower stages post-change or after new leadership is appointed. Teams will advance well or poorly through these stages (or not at all in some cases) depending upon just how well their leaders manage the process. Some will fail to move past the troublesome second stage of *Storming* if there is no attempt to understand what is required to progress.

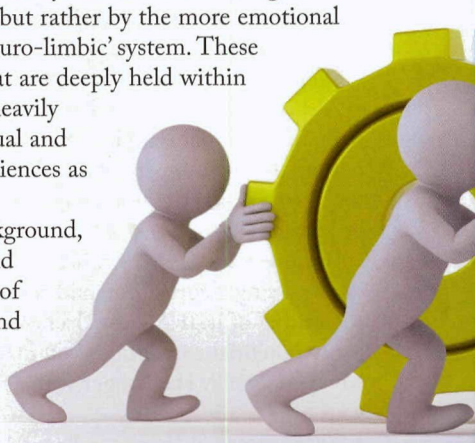
Tuckman's model still serves as a great tool for teambuilding, as it is such an elegant and simple illustration of how teams develop. When it is blended with the Hersey/Blanchard Situational Leadership approach, a leader can also get a far better feel for how his preferred leadership styles may be best deployed as his team develops.

An understanding of the Belbin Team Role model will also enable leaders and team members to accelerate their journey towards becoming high-performing teams and help them to avoid getting stuck in any of the lower stages of the Tuckman model. Team Role theory is particularly valuable for the leader who will quite naturally experience the impact of his own strengths and weaknesses within each stage as the team develops.

A team that is weighted very heavily with *action*-orientated team roles, for example, will progress quite differently to one that is biased more towards *thinking* or *socially*-orientated roles. It is, indeed, useful to know what team role mix a leader will have to deal with by accurately profiling the team. Individual profiles, team reports and working relationship reports provide great insights for a leader.

Current insights from neuroscience are also useful and confirm that numerous social systems will reliably unfold within the human brain as a team develops. These systems engage at an individual level and also collectively within teams in subtly different ways. We often use the work of Peter Burow, an author and renowned expert on neuroscience[1], for team and leadership development; his *Neuropower Framework* provides ground-breaking insights, as well as comforting correlations between some established models (such as those in this article) and the current science.

Humans are emotional creatures and these social systems are not always driven from the higher 'rational' brain, but rather by the more emotional and reactive 'neuro-limbic' system. These 'core beliefs' that are deeply held within the brain will heavily flavour individual and collective experiences as teams develop.



The full background, implications and underpinnings of these models and theories extend far beyond the scope of this brief article. What

follows is intended only to introduce some of the approaches that we will often draw upon to assist client teams in developing and accelerating their journey.

So, in a nutshell, how do things unfold at their best when Team Role theory meets Tuckman, Situational Leadership and neuroscience?

Stage 1 FORMING – *directing* style of leadership required

The general characteristics of the team in this stage…

In this stage, teams are eager and have high expectations of what is to come. There is also a little anxiety about how a person's own preferred operating styles and team roles will fit in with those of other team members and be valued or not by the team's appointed leadership.

People test each other's social responses and start to get a feel for what the 'pecking order' may be, and where power actually sits within the group. The team is still somewhat dependent upon the formally-imposed hierarchy and a clearly delineated path of authority, clarity of rules and punishments etc.

Individuals are seeking clarity on where their place is within the team, and looking for a sense of security and recognition from peers and the leadership that they do indeed belong in this team. According to the neuroscience, the social system of the brain that is being triggered here is known as the automatic system and is concerned with how power, rules and security are evident within the 'tribe'. This social system of the brain is a natural hangover from our time in the forests, where to be 'included' or 'expelled' from the group was literally a matter of life and death.

It's actually quite okay to fight, but are you fighting about the right things?

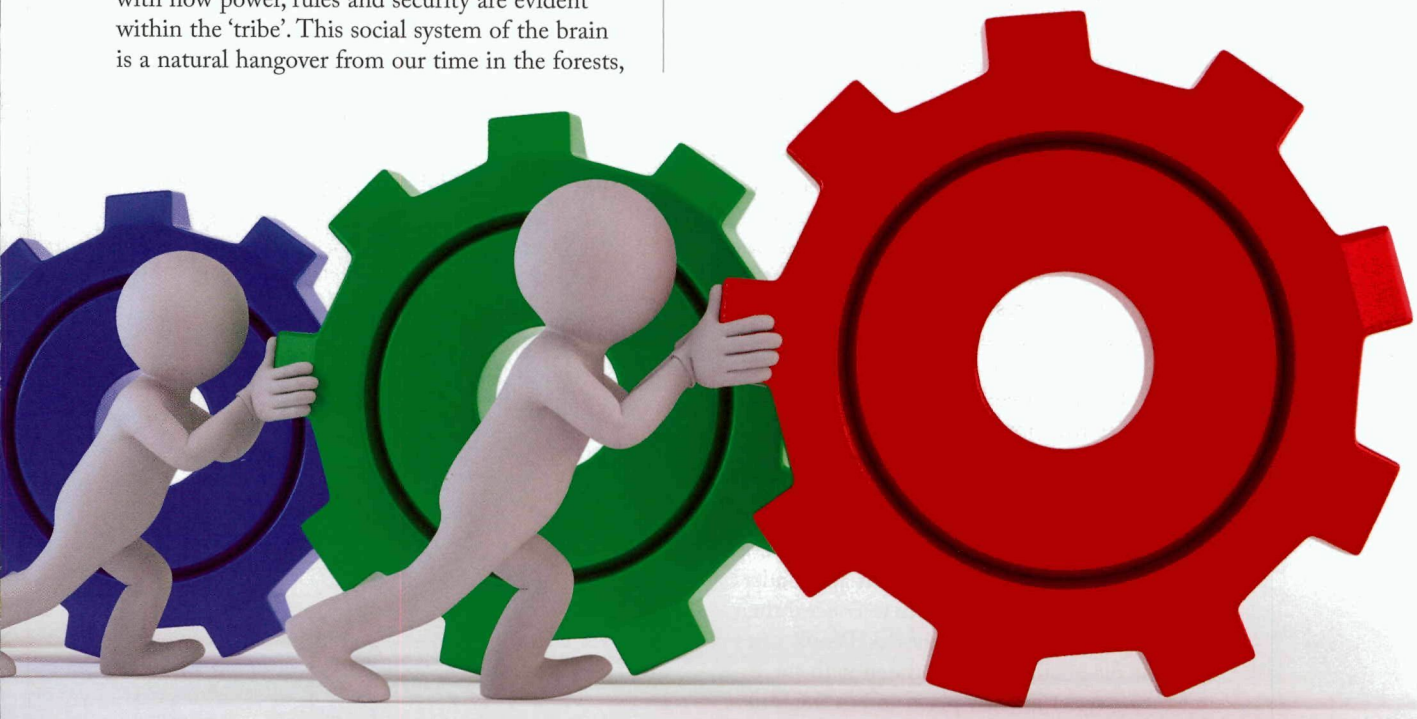
When looking at any of the established models and the conclusions of recent neuroscience, it's nice to have those 'ah-ha, so that's why that old model works so well' moments.

As people are exploring their new team, they usually tend to be rather polite, as they have not as yet spent enough time together for the cracks to appear. As the different operating styles and Team Role styles become more apparent under real-world pressures, clashes occur.

An understanding of what each person's natural Team Role style is while in this first stage can genuinely help to establish a common language from the outset for identifying and embracing diversity as the team develops. Individual and collective team profiles using the Belbin model will paint a far clearer picture of what the team dynamic is. This helps prepare leaders and teams for how they will handle each subsequent stage, as each person carries with them differing coping →

Reference

1 http://bit.ly/1lhXrTZ



Conflict arises as frustration and anger flares over how our collective plans and tasks are unfolding

strategies. For a good leader, being forewarned is forearmed.

Useful inputs from a leader in this stage…
The major issues within the team at this stage are around inclusion and the building of interpersonal and collective trust. On this basis, the leader will do well to provide a more directive style of leadership as this is what is required to set the team on its way. Belbin's *Shaper* or *Co-ordinator* styles tend to be comfortable gravitating to what's required here.

A leader needs to provide initial structure and then start building a solid framework within which people can establish true role clarity for their task-related skillsets and for how their Team Roles best balance with each other. The setting of clear goals and a direction for the team are also crucial to establish confidence in 'why we are here' and 'what we are doing'.

Once again, in the deep recesses of the brain, each person's social systems are subconsciously seeking security, trust and belonging. If it is not evident, a team can have a less-than-perfect foundation from which to move to the next stage.

If Team Role behaviours are better understood from the outset, it helps to satisfy the needs of the human brain for clarity about how we actually all relate to one another here in this team. Genuine tolerance will take time (usually not until at least stage three) but introducing the concept early will certainly help.

Stage 2 STORMING – *Coaching* style of leadership required

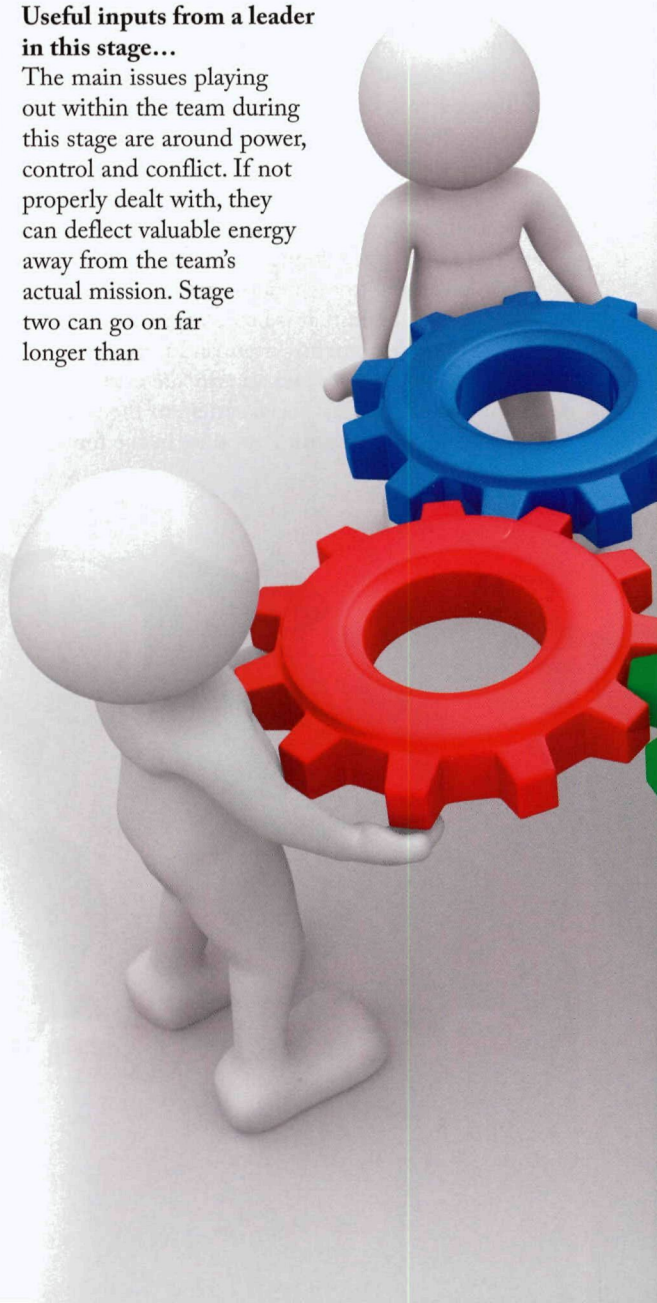
General characteristics of the team in this stage…
As the initial honeymoon period comes to an end, people start to project their natural operating styles with somewhat less restraint and, under genuine stress, with less ability to conceal their associated Team Role weaknesses. People can become dissatisfied and frustrated with the operating styles of their peers and of the leader.

Conflict arises as frustration and anger flares over how our collective plans and tasks are unfolding. As people start to carve their own paths for achieving the mission (usually to suit their own preferred operating styles and views of 'how things are done around here'), negative reactions to internal power struggles and cycles of blame can occur.

As we know, some Team Role styles are quite comfortable with conflict while others, such as Belbin's *Teamworker*, are far less so (even to the point of complete withdrawal or avoidance of even necessary conflict).

In this stage, the social systems of the brain at work are known as 'emotional' and 'intervention'. These initially manifest themselves as subconscious concerns for fun and self-expression, then progressively for power, recognition and perhaps pushing the boundaries.

Useful inputs from a leader in this stage…
The main issues playing out within the team during this stage are around power, control and conflict. If not properly dealt with, they can deflect valuable energy away from the team's actual mission. Stage two can go on far longer than



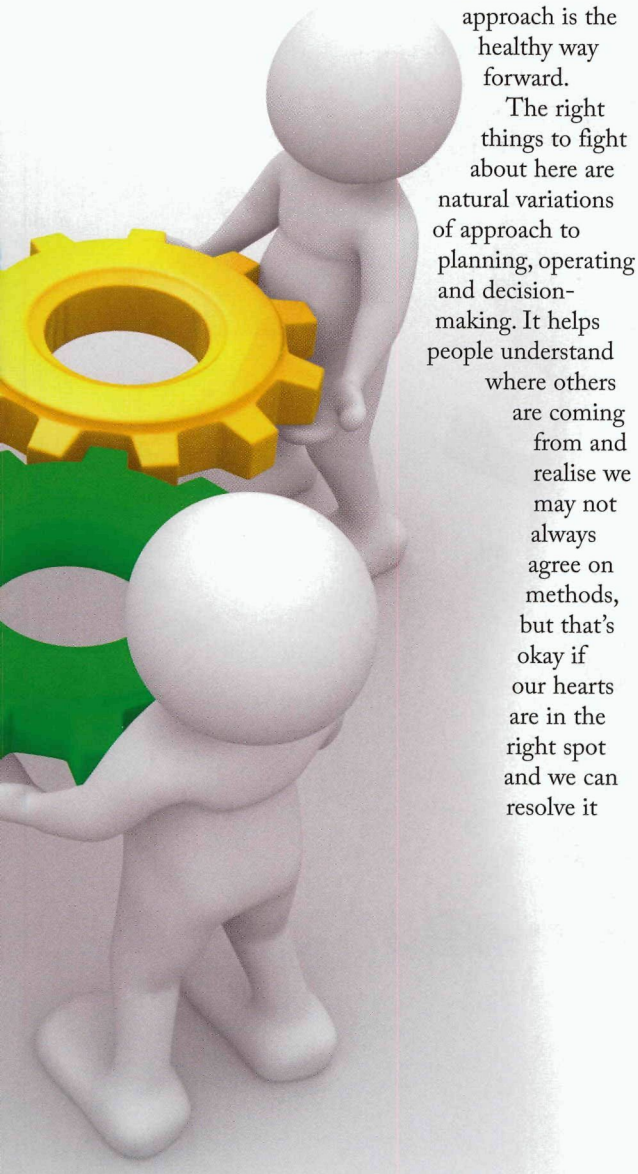
it needs to if conflict is swept under the carpet.

A leader needs to help people begin to develop genuine understanding of the different Team Role styles and how the diversity of contributions, thinking styles and personalities become evident within the team (and how valuable this can be if properly drawn upon).

Goals need to be redefined and refocused upon. Positive ways of handling conflict and learning to work together are crucial as people seek to express their emotions. It can be counter-productive to avoid or block the expression of emotions at this stage. It's quite a natural reaction to moving through the *Storming* stage.

It's actually quite okay to fight, but are you fighting about the right things?

Clashes and differences in operating styles are quite natural and are to be expected in this stage. If well handled, the team will actually learn to deal with conflict quickly as it arises and take it far less personally. Developing strategies that all can use to professionally deal with variances of approach is the healthy way forward.



The right things to fight about here are natural variations of approach to planning, operating and decision-making. It helps people understand where others are coming from and realise we may not always agree on methods, but that's okay if our hearts are in the right spot and we can resolve it professionally. You might drive me nuts sometimes but if, in Team Role terms, I know why you drive me nuts, it's easier for me not to take it personally.

A team that has the luxury of mature and professional members can thus choose to 'fight right' about these issues as a valuable step towards actually moving forward together. A team with members that lack maturity or professionalism may start to 'fight wrong' about petty interpersonal issues and trivia. This will see a team stuck for far too long in this stage or, indeed, remaining here indefinitely.

Those Team Role styles that are more conflict-averse can struggle in this stage and need to see that it is quite natural and actually highly beneficial to argue professionally about the right things. If handled in a professional manner that is acceptable to the members of the team, conflict actually allows you to innovate and move forward, faster and stronger. Ironically, too much avoidance of conflict in stage two just leads to more conflict and the team ultimately becoming stuck in an unpleasant and unresolved cycle of conflict.

I often see teams that are high in the role of *teamworker* in exactly this position. As individuals, they are perplexed about why the team atmosphere is so tense when their natural inclination is genuinely towards harmony. Once they have those 'difficult conversations' (usually nudged to do so by a team *co-ordinator*), the air is cleared and the whole team can move on.

Dealing quickly with conflict enables some key demands of the social brain to be met and so, consciously and subconsciously, there is space to move into the next stage.

Knowing what each person's Team Role profile is will naturally help to accelerate this stage by offering greater insight into who is likely to initiate and deal with conflict as it arises, and those who may avoid it at all costs and thus risk keeping the team here for longer than is actually required.

Stage 3 NORMING – *Supportive* leadership style required

General characteristics of the team in this stage…

If a leader has been effective at coaching the team into having the 'difficult conversations' and handling conflict effectively, its members' dissatisfaction and frustrations will start to decline.

Being clear about what each person's Team Role contributions are, and how others may have very different ones to us (or indeed ones that may be too similar to ours), will help smooth over disappointments and clashes.

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Expectations of self and others in terms of the team and its missions start to actually align with reality as opposed to individuals' often biased perceptions of reality when in conflict during stage two.

Polarities of behaviour start to gravitate back to the middle as harmony, trust and a more natural sense of respect for other operating styles grows. Understanding and respect of other styles is crucial here. The language of the Team Roles can assist in taking the 'personality' and 'emotional bias' out of potential clashes in operating styles.

Established methods of providing feedback to one another are in place (usually arising as a positive outcome from dealing properly with conflict in stage two) and people's confidence and self-esteem grows as a 'team language' develops and people actually start to share responsibility and control, and develop genuine respect for the different styles that sit alongside their own.

The social systems of the brain at work here are the 'objective' system, which deals with factual data and inputs while removing emotional biases, and the 'relational' system, which enables a more natural ability to appreciate and leverage the strengths of others within a tribe or group.

Useful inputs from a leader in this stage...

A leader's main issues in this stage are around moving from being a driver of structure and policy to becoming more of a facilitator.

Control starts to shift from leader to the team, and this can be a challenge for leaders with certain team role preferences who are more comfortable with command and control. The team is now enabled to confront areas of conflict quickly as they arise with less emotional bias, to have the difficult conversations themselves and to look for real solutions as opposed to just succumbing to 'groupthink' or sweeping things under the carpet.

A leader will need to work on developing the skills of each member and deepening their understanding of how the dynamics of the team actually manifest under pressure. Encouraging people to keep sharing their opinions, ideas and leveraging one another's skills and varying Team Role strengths will build a platform for moving into the next stage.

In this stage, certain Team Role styles are better able than others in deploying rational objectivity. The *Monitor Evaluator* springs to mind. Constructive and critical benchmarking of where the team 'actually is' and how we are 'actually doing' against our stated goals and objectives is a useful method for examining team process and matching it to real-world outcomes.

Knowing what the indicators are when the team members are 'task and information' overloaded, and therefore likely to be more subject to emotional biases, will also help to ensure that objectivity is not lost by glossing over reviews or sugar-coating them on the run.

Stage 4 PERFORMING – *delegating* style of leadership required

General characteristics of a team in this stage...
Having successfully navigated the previous stages of team development, there is a sense of genuine optimism, excitement and engagement with what the team does and where it's going.

Team members naturally project their Team Role strengths and offset one another's weaknesses with confidence as almost second nature. Collaboration is not just a word that has lip service paid to it: it has become an integral factor of the team's strength.

The team is performing well, even under pressure, and has a sense of positivity and confidence. The leadership role becomes less formalised, and can even be shared based upon the Team Role contribution that may be required for any given scenario or project.

The social systems of the brain at work here are the 'relational' system, which enhances understanding and appreciation of the contributions of others, and the 'open' system, which, like a modem, will enable clear 'downloads' and 'feeds' of any new ideas, unexpected changes and approaches.

Useful inputs from a leader in this stage...
At this stage a leader is more aware of how the team is actually adapting to expected and unexpected changes in its situation, and also better managing the changes occurring within the team.

A leader can now focus more clearly upon achieving team goals, dealing effectively with interpersonal issues as they may arise (as they always will, even in the very best of teams) and deepening skills and understanding within the team even further.

A leader will need to work on developing the skills of each member and deepening their understanding of how the dynamics of the team actually manifest under pressure

More Stages? ADJOURNING and REFORMING – *knowing when and how to revisit the stages is required*

External and internal changes can trigger profound shifts in Team Role dynamics and behaviours. These changes are triggered by changes to the previously established 'tribe'. The brain's core beliefs and social systems are triggered once again as new faces, structures or challenges that lie outside the team's accepted experience base or brief emerge. The team's 'chemistry' has thus been altered and so back we go together to revisit characteristics of earlier team development stages.

Leaders and teams need to try to maintain objectivity about what stages of the team development process are actually being revisited, and how to progress once again through them as smoothly as possible. New people will especially alter the Team Role dynamics.

Adjourning As teams disband, due to either the natural completion of their assigned mission or restructures and mergers etc, each member can take with them a knowledge of this process to usefully apply to any team in which they may find themselves in future.

Reforming Major change, repetitive change, new team members and especially a change of leadership will see a team quickly revisit the earlier stages of its development. This is a natural aspect of the way that the social systems of the human brain operate. A good leader with awareness of this process can assess where the team finds itself, and then apply his knowledge once again to accelerate its progress up through these stages. **TJ**

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